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THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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At no period in the world's history has the problem of suffering been more acute and more haunting in its claims upon human thought than today. We say more acute, not because the value placed upon human life and the actual disasters to the individual are greater, but because higher ideals bring with them a greater capacity for suffering, both individually and as members of society. This course will lead many to think more broadly and to develop more universal sympathy, perhaps also to gain a clearer view of God and human destiny.

[Those who desire to conduct classes or to have this course in separate form can secure reprints from the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, at twenty-five cents for the course of five months. Leaders of classes will also be provided with a series of programs and suggestions, as well as lists of reference books, upon reporting classes to the INSTITUTE.]

STUDY I

THE PROBLEM AND THE EARLIER ATTEMPTS AT ITS SOLUTION

From a recent book dealing with our subject we borrow the following words appraising the importance of the problem of suffering, and man's perpetual interest therein:

The problem of suffering is the great enigma *vitae*, the solution of which, forever attempted, may forever baffle the human mind. Why our planet has been invaded by physical and moral evil; why a God of infinite love and power has ordained or permitted the sufferings of sentient beings; why his "whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now"; why, in particular, the operation of pain is so indiscriminate that the innocent suffer with the guilty—these questions are asked in bewilderment today, and the facts which evoke them have troubled the spirit of man ever since it began to grope for a meaning and purpose in life. This is the sphinx riddle of existence. . . .

Every age endeavors to throw some fresh glimmer of light on the perennial problem, which ordinarily presents itself to the plain man, not as an intellectual puzzle, but as a heart-piercing sorrow, or a haunting fear.

Our own age which brings to the solution of old problems the new light of evolution is profoundly conscious of the anomalies of the world regarded as a moral order. Increasing culture has increased its capacity for pain—its sensitiveness, its sympathy, its perplexity in the presence of the mystery of evil. . . .

If Faith is to secure and retain the allegiance of the modern mind, it must somehow come to terms with the enigma of suffering, and be able, if not to explain it, at least to

render it tolerable. No problem is more worthy of mental toil. Grant that human reason can never wholly solve it, that clouds and darkness must ever be round about it, yet even to state it correctly is no small help, while to discuss it, to offer tentative and partial solutions of it, may place the intelligence in a position of superiority to it.

Happily no age has to wrestle with the mystery as if it had never been attacked before. Many bewildered sufferers have asked ere now how divine goodness can be compatible with the existence of pain, and have sought not all in vain to answer their own question [James Strahan, *The Book of Job Interpreted*, 1913, pp. 1-3].

The view regarding the cause of suffering was the same throughout the entire ancient world. That is to say, suffering was looked upon as due to the wrath of the gods. In the first stages of thought upon this subject the anger of the gods was thought of as being wholly arbitrary in character. The sufferer did not know why he suffered. The god was angry—that was all.

As men came to believe themselves better acquainted with the ways of the gods, and as the sphere of men's obligation to them became more definite, the anger of the gods was conceived of as aroused by the neglect of some duty toward them on the part of man. This neglect of duty might be voluntary or involuntary and unconscious. The consequences in the way of divine wrath and suffering were just the same. Gradually, however, the feeling grew that man was not responsible for offenses which he never intended to give. Suffering then came to be thought of as due to conscious, deliberate remissness, that is, sin.

We have set ourselves the task of tracing the progress of the Hebrews in their thought upon this subject.

First day.—§ 1. Read Gen. 2:4—3:24 as an expression of the point of view of suffering to which we have referred. Note the simple character of the thought; for example, Jehovah God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, 3:8; Jehovah asking Adam "Where art thou?" vs. 9; the sewing of the fig leaves, vs. 7; the first clothes made of skins of animals, vs. 20.

Is it likely that in so childlike a narrative we shall find anything profoundly philosophical or theological? This old story of the first sin is presented as a type of all sin. It emphasizes the thought that sin is opposition to the will of God. The result of this sin is represented as a change, not in man's character, but in his lot. All the ills of life and its manifold suffering are thought to be due to this first act of disobedience. Re-read vss. 14-19 from this point of view.

Second day.—§ 2. The first step in the progress of thought regarding human suffering was made by the great prophets beginning with the eighth century B.C. They insisted that the anger of God was primarily aroused by violations of the ethical law. Read Hos., chap. 10; 11:12; 12:6-9, noting the emphasis upon righteousness.

Third day.—Read Hos. 4:6-8; 5:10-15; 8:4-10, and note the prophet's denunciation of all kinds of social injustice.

Fourth day.—Read Isa. 1:10-17, noting how this prophet a half-century later repudiates sacrifices and ritual as sufficient in and of themselves, and insists upon justice and mercy as indispensable to the favor of Jehovah, representing Jehovah as hiding his face from Judah because of the absence of these qualities.

Fifth day.—Read Mic. 6:6-8, and notice how this definition of religion again affirms the supreme place of justice and mercy in the ideal of the prophets.

Sixth day.—§ 3. Read II Kings 22:1—23:25 containing an account of the finding of a book in the year 621 B.C. In all probability that book appears in our own Bible as a portion of Deuteronomy.

Seventh day.—Turn to the Book of Deuteronomy and read 25:13-16. In this section of the legal literature of the Hebrews, which voices also the prophetic doctrine of the seventh century B.C., we have the same emphasis upon the necessity of a right moral character

Eighth day.—Read Deut. 12:28, and observe also that the old prophetic doctrine, that if the commandments of God are kept prosperity is certain to follow, is again clearly stated. It should be borne in mind also that in the prophetic literature, and in Deuteronomy in particular, the welfare of the nation is the dominant thought. The problem of individual prosperity receives practically no consideration.

Ninth day.—§ 4. What we may call the orthodox doctrine in Israel which we have just been considering was eminently satisfactory so long as things went well and normal conditions were maintained. But the half-century before the exile, commencing in 597 B.C., brought upon Israel unparalleled suffering in spite of all that she could do. Read Isa., chaps. 36, 37, which tell the story of the suffering of Israel at the hands of Sennacherib, and this notwithstanding the fact that Hezekiah is represented as a good king. See also II Kings 18:13—19:37.

Tenth day.—Read II Kings 23:24-31, the story of the death of Josiah, who is represented as a pious king *par excellence*. Remember that Josiah had carried out a thoroughgoing reform in religion and morals (see sixth day), and yet he was killed and his army defeated.

Eleventh day.—Consider the later submission to Egypt, II Kings 23:31-36; still later that to Babylonia, 24:1-7; and the deportation of inhabitants of Jerusalem to Babylonia in 597 B.C., 24:10-17.

Twelfth day.—Remember that Jerusalem itself fell in 586 B.C., and that the flower of Israel was carried away into exile immediately after. Read II Kings 24:18—25:21. What must have been the thought of those who were faithful in Israel in the light of such a series of disasters as these? Was it possible for them to think of God as just? Would not questions inevitably arise as to the justice of Jehovah, or as to his power, or as to his love?

Thirteenth day.—§ 5. From the midst of this period of misery there comes down to us the Book of Habakkuk in which the prophet faces the great problem of his times. Read Hab. 1:2-4, observing how the prophet is disturbed mentally and spiritually by the moral chaos prevailing among his contemporaries. See how he hurls his question into the face of Jehovah. This is an absolutely new thing in the history of prophecy.

Fourteenth day.—§ 6. Read Hab. 1:5-11, and see how there comes to the prophet's mind in answer to his question the thought that Jehovah is about to send the Chaldeans from Babylonia to punish the wicked Israelites.

Fifteenth day.—§ 7. Read 1:12-17, noting how the prophet refuses to remain satisfied with this answer. He now confronts Jehovah with a new question, namely, How can God fairly be justified in causing the most wicked of all peoples to triumph over his own people who are, after all, far better than the Chaldeans?

Sixteenth day.—§ 8. Read Hab. 2:1-3, and see how the prophet figuratively represents himself as waiting patiently and expectantly for an answer to this, his latest problem, and how while waiting he was filled with confidence that a satisfactory answer would be forthcoming.

Seventeenth day.—§ 9. Read Hab. 2:4-20, and note that this is the longed-for answer. What does the answer say? Is it not to this effect, that the Chaldean by reason of his inherent depravity cannot possibly survive indefinitely? But, on the other hand, Israel the righteous shall endure because of his faithfulness. (The word translated in the English Bible "faith" is more correctly rendered "faithfulness," as in the margin, and in reality is about equivalent to our word "integrity.") Has the prophet made any new contribution to the thought regarding suffering? As a matter of fact, is he not simply restating the old teaching that righteousness must finally triumph, and that wickedness must be ultimately overthrown? However, the prophet has dared to raise the question; and this is saying much. He is the forerunner of a great succession of thinkers upon this age-long problem. He shows that it is possible to be in a questioning frame of mind about some aspects of religion and yet be none the less religious.

Eighteenth day.—§ 10. From a little later day than that of Habakkuk we have the utterances of Ezekiel. Read Ezek. 1:1-3, observing that this information is that Ezekiel's prophetic activity was carried on in the midst of the exile in Babylonia, beginning about 592 B.C.

Nineteenth day.—Read Ezek. 11:3-11, noting that Ezekiel's contemporaries still refuse to believe the final destruction of Jerusalem possible.

Twentieth day.—Read Ezek. 13:1-10, 16, noting that Ezekiel's contemporary prophets, both in Jerusalem and in Babylon, were fanatically preaching the certainty of coming prosperity.

Twenty-first day.—Read Ezek. 12:21-28, noting the skeptical and scoffing attitude of Ezekiel's contemporaries toward his message.

Twenty-second day.—§ 11. Read Ezek. 14:16-20, observing the belief in the protecting power of vicarious piety. Ezekiel in this passage is evidently setting himself against the popular view that Jerusalem cannot possibly be destroyed because of the many righteous men therein.

Twenty-third day.—§ 12. Read Ezek. 18:1, 2, 25, 29, noting that these verses mean that many of the people to whom Ezekiel was preaching were criticizing Jehovah on the basis of the course of events. That is to say, they were ironically saying that it was a fine piece of justice for Jehovah to be punishing them because of what their fathers and grandfathers had done.

Twenty-fourth day.—Read II Kings 23:21-30, noting especially vs. 26 in which there is expressed fear that the suffering of Israel in the days of Josiah and his successors was occasioned by the sins of Manasseh. Is not this exactly what the opponents of Ezekiel were saying? And yet Ezekiel sets himself uncompromisingly against that position.

Twenty-fifth day.—§ 13. Read Ezek. 3:16-20, observing two things: first, that Ezekiel here regards his mission as concerned with the welfare of the souls of individuals (Ezekiel is the first prophet to conceive of his work from that standpoint); secondly, that Ezekiel evidently regards each man as master of his own destiny without let or hindrance on account of the actions of his ancestors.

Twenty-sixth day.—Read Ezek. 18:1-9, and see (1) that Ezekiel is here again dealing with individuals and their fate; (2) that he regards each person as sustaining his own individual relation to his God, vs. 4; (3) that he conditions a man's fate upon his conduct, vss. 5-9; (4) that he combines ritualistic and moral requirements in his catalogue of virtues.

Twenty-seventh day.—Read Ezek. 18:18-22 in which the prophet restates concisely the teaching he has previously formulated.

Twenty-eighth day.—§ 14. Read Ezek. 18:10-13, and see that Ezekiel clearly states that the righteousness of a father will not avail to shield the wickedness of his son. Read Ezek. 18:14-17, and see that just as confidently Ezekiel declares that the wickedness of a father will not bring destruction upon his righteous son.

Twenty-ninth day.—§ 15. Read Ezek. 18:23, 24, 32, and note the beauty of the thought that Jehovah does not desire the death of any man, but would much rather that man should live and enjoy his favor.

Thirtieth day.—§ 16. Read Ezek. 18:25-31, considering (1) the fact that Ezekiel's contemporaries were openly criticizing the justice of Jehovah (see particularly vss. 25 and 29); (2) does it not appear here and throughout the chapter that Ezekiel conceives of man's destiny as determined by his individual actions at the time when judgment is pronounced? Does Ezekiel allow any place for underlying character? Is not his attitude on this subject too atomistic?

Thirty-first day.—§ 17. Ezekiel's message was of supreme importance in his day. The nation of Israel was on the verge of collapse. If the religion of Jehovah were to stand or to fall with the fate of his nation, then nation and religion alike must perish. Ezekiel says that, after all, religion is a matter of personal relationship to, and fellowship with, God. He therefore works mightily to put religion on a new basis, and to enable it to tide over the great disaster involved in the destruction of Jerusalem and the overthrow of the monarchy. It is noticeable that Ezekiel has formulated no new theory regarding the cause of suffering. He has simply transferred the discussion from one field to another, namely, from a national problem to the individual problem. He still holds that prosperity is the reward of piety and that punishment and sorrow are the result of sin.

In thinking through the month's work note the progress made by the Hebrews in the period covered. They have moralized the whole question, tying up prosperity indissolubly with moral worth. They have furthermore dared to question current opinions on the subject in two cases. Habakkuk actually ventured in his own mind to call Jehovah to account for his treatment of Israel, with the result that he became more convinced than ever that Jehovah was on the side of the nation whose ways were right. Ezekiel met the question of his day regarding Jehovah's justice by denying the commonly received teaching that individuals inherited the merits or demerits of their ancestors, and by affirming for the first time in Hebrew history that each individual was responsible before Jehovah for his own conduct and only for his own.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever given thought to the problem of suffering?
2. As you have observed life, is the old theory that sin brings immediate punishment upon the offender, in the nature of suffering, true?

3. Does the theory that God hides his face from the wicked and gives prosperity to the righteous represent the facts as you see them?
4. What religious leaders among the Hebrews were the first to make progress in thinking upon this problem?
5. What is the fundamental insistence of Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah concerning conduct?
6. Were the prophets previous to Josiah's death thinking primarily of the nation or of the individual?
7. Why was the death of Josiah a spiritual, as well as a political, blow to the Hebrew nation?
8. When they first went into exile, what questions must the faithful Jews have asked concerning the justice of God?
9. What concerning his power?
10. What concerning his faithfulness to his covenant promise?
11. Who was Habakkuk?
12. What was his question, and to whom did he address it?
13. What was the answer as he conceived it?
14. Tell all that you can about Ezekiel.
15. Why could not the people believe Ezekiel's statements that Jerusalem would surely be destroyed?
16. What theories concerning suffering does Ezekiel seek definitely to overthrow?
17. What new theory does he bring forward as a substitute?
18. What national situations today lead us to think seriously upon this world-old problem?

SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES IN THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY GEORGIA L. CHAMBERLIN

The author of the present course, "The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament," is able to point out to us those passages from historians, prophets, poets, and sages, which contain more or less definite statements of the views of the Hebrew people and their leaders of their philosophy of suffering. It is pre-eminently a religious question with all and inseparably linked with their growing conception of God, and of his relation to the Hebrew people and to the world. These statements, however, can be understood and appreciated only as they are studied in relation to the history that lies back of them. The task of the leader of the class, therefore, will be in great measure to see that his group receives through him and through their own work a keen appreciation of those crises in the history of Israel which caused greatest suffering to the nation and to individuals, and out of the midst of which their theories were evolved. All members of the group should be urged, therefore, to read a brief history of the Hebrew